

IN MEMORIAM: DAVID PENNY (1930-1983)

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The memorial gathering at Janet and David's Canberra house was dignified and beautiful. At its heart were extracts from letters his friends had written to David in the previous two months. I wrote down "Your Sriharjo study helped me crystallize a commitment to social justice," "helping us to understand our farmers," "uncompromising stance," "unequal exchange between us and Aborigines," and "injustices of which the greatest part are remediable now."

The eldest of four children of an Adelaide teacher couple, David grew up to model himself on a father who had strong ideas about justice and humanity and hated hypocrisy and muddle. Harry Penny later became a teachers' college principal and worked in Thailand and Papua New Guinea. Father and son shared a wide range of interests and remained close friends throughout David's life, exchanging drafts of each other's writings and arguing about many subjects with mutual enjoyment. When David was dying and had a book to finish it was his father who came to Canberra to help him with it.

David did his undergraduate degree in economics at the University of Adelaide and then a Master's degree there, working under Frank Jarrett on a study of soldier settlement. It was in his Master's work that he developed his strong sense of the importance of two-way learning between the researcher and his subject. In 1954 he went to Stanford, where he worked in the Food Research Institute and met Janet Linden, an undergraduate from Seattle. He returned to Adelaide a year later, but by 1957 was back in the United States. He and Janet married in that year and David started a Ph.D. in Agricultural Economics at Cornell, hoping to find a way of getting to Indonesia.

David studied Indonesian at Cornell and took some Southeast Asia seminars. But he never became part of the Cornell of the Southeast Asia Program or the Modern Indonesia Project. It was the professors in Agricultural Economics who had the greatest impact on his thinking, particularly Bud Stanton and Stan Warren, whose practical approach to economic development impressed him. After a summer's graduate assistantship with A. B. Lewis of the Council on Economic and Cultural Affairs, he was appointed a fellow of this small Rockefeller-funded Council. Under the auspices of this body, later renamed the Agricultural Development Council, David went to Medan in late 1958 to be a visiting professor in the Agriculture Faculty of the University of North Sumatra.

It was in the Pennys' six years in Medan that their two children were born. And it was in those years that David developed his distinctive approaches to teaching and research. Partly in response to his Agricultural Development Council colleagues who had worked among villagers in other Third World countries, especially Art Mosher and A. B. Lewis, David argued for very close links between teaching and research, and for forms of research which would help its "objects" to become understanding subjects. He did a great deal of village research himself and generated enthusiasm for village research among his students. The Cornell thesis he

eventually wrote on "The Transition from Subsistence to Commercial Family Farming in North Sumatra" was based in large part on the research he did in eight villages of this province with a group of fourth-year students. Many of his lasting friendships date back to this Medan period: Tan Hong Tong, Meneth Ginting, Rachman Rangkuti, and Hans Westenberg.

By late 1964 David was looking for work outside Indonesia, mainly because of what the anti-Western agitation of the late Guided Democracy period was doing to his work and the daily life of his family. And Heinz Arndt of the Australian National University in Canberra was looking for staff for the new Indonesia Project in his Economics Department. So David went to Canberra in June 1965, and it was not long before he and Janet had decided they wanted to settle down there.

By the latter half of 1966 it was clear that Indonesia would be opening its doors wide to Western economists. Western governments were looking for ways of helping the new Suharto government and Western economists with Indonesia experience were frequently asked for advice and help. Widjojo Nitisastro, Mohammad Sadli, Ali Wardhana, Emil Salim, and the other University of Indonesia economists who were later called the "Bappenas group" and the "Berkeley Mafia," played pivotal roles in economic policy making in 1966 and the following years, and Heinz Arndt emerged as one of their vigorous advocates. The ANU's Indonesia Project with its *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies* became a significant factor in the emerging pattern of politico-economic linkages. David was involved in a good deal of the reporting, evaluating, and consulting that grew out of the Bappenas-ANU connection. But his attitude towards it was skeptical and frequently dissident--for reasons that included his new involvement with poverty in rural Java.

David had long been an admirer and disciple of Sajogyo, the rural sociologist at the Bogor Agricultural Institute. In the late 1960s he made frequent visits at Sajogyo's invitation to Bogor and nearby Ciawi to teach short courses on research method and assist in the work of the Agro-Economic Survey. At a time when most Western economists working on Indonesia were excited by the speed of its recovery from hyper-inflation, and the effectiveness of the IMF remedies as administered by Suharto and his economic guru Widjojo, David was primarily concerned to draw attention to the desperate poverty he saw in village Java.

The question of just how poor Javanese village society is became a central preoccupation for David Penny. In later years he enjoyed telling the story of his arguments with Masri Singarimbun on this subject. Masri, then on the staff of the ANU's Demography Department, had visited villages in various parts of Java in 1968 and been impressed by the evidence of a new prosperity. On his return, he told David he was sure he was exaggerating the depth of Java's poverty. The two argued, with neither persuading the other. In the following year the Singarimbuns settled down for their extended fieldwork in Sriharjo near Yogyakarta, and within a few months Masri was writing to Canberra to say that the poverty he found in lushly green Sriharjo was far worse than David had pictured! Masri's account of this series of arguments is in "Ekonomi Kelaparan, Selamat Tinggal" (*Tempo*, November 12, 1983).

David and Masri's monograph on Sriharjo, *Population and Poverty in Rural Java: Some Economic Arithmetic from Sriharjo*, may well stand as the most significant of David's scholarly contributions. Its impact to date has certainly been great. In any event, Sriharjo was for David the climax of a most important intellectual journey. While in North Sumatra he had seen commercialization and economic growth as fundamentally benign. In Java malign commercialization hit him with a shock. The realization that economic growth could make large numbers of people poorer set him firmly on the path of rebellion against the dominant forms of economics.

In Sriharjo there were tenants who were willing to rent land from owners to whom they had to pay 90 percent of their earnings. There were borrowers willing to pay interest at 15 percent per day. Economic competition was so fierce that people went to great lengths to conceal technical knowledge from their neighbors. Marketization had been accompanied by a major decline in the quality of social life--by more mutual mistrust and more theft.

Discovering human misery on this scale did not drive David Penny to despair, for he was strongly convinced that the poverty he found in rural Java could be ended. On the contrary, it heightened his sense of mission. He had always been an argumentative person. Now he argued with a sense of new urgency and assuredness--while devouring large numbers of books on poverty, starvation, and famine in many times and places. In his study leave of 1972-73 he gave seminars at many institutions in Western Europe, the Soviet Union, and the US, arguing that what he and Singarimbun had found in Sriharjo showed fundamental flaws in the "growth model of economic development."

Within Australia, David's disagreements with Heinz Arndt had by this time attained the quality of a Great Debate. The 10-page comment he wrote with the geographer Terry McGee on Heinz Arndt's 1974 paper "Development and Equality: The Indonesian Case" is perhaps the most powerful of his polemical writing.

In 1974 he took a major decision, one he sometimes regretted in later years. Leaving full-time academic work, he became a public servant, accepting a newly created position as Research Director in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. The decision reflected the deadlock that had developed in his relations with Heinz Arndt. It was also a response to the challenges the new Whitlam government was generating; this first Labor government after twenty-three years was then at a heady stage. But there was also a sense in which David was responding to something Sriharjo had taught him: Do something about poverty and powerlessness in your own country. Do something about the misery to which Western domination and the triumphalism of economic man has given rise. Do something about the myopia and ethnocentric heartlessness of which Aboriginal Australians are victims.

It seems that David achieved a great deal in the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. He certainly maintained high morale in his own section. And he gave many Aboriginal public servants a heightened capacity to express their own ideas and fight for their adoption. But he also lost a lot of important battles, and there were several points at which he was frustrated enough to be looking for ways back to academia.

One continuing source of satisfaction in those years were his trips to Indonesia. It had been agreed when he accepted the public service post that he would be allowed time to maintain his Indonesian links, and this undertaking was respected. So he spent between two weeks and two months of every year in Indonesia--usually in Medan, Bogor, and Yogya--lecturing, teaching postgraduate seminars, and attending conferences of PERHEPI, the Indonesian association of agricultural economists.

In 1981, when his frustration with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs had reached a new peak, he decided to take unpaid leave. He spent the next year working at the ANU's Development Studies Centre, partly on a book with Meneth Ginting on Indonesian housegardens, but mostly on a broader and more ambitious project on the economics of starvation.

Fastening onto the fact that economists have had little concern with famine, that they have been content to leave study of this major economic phenomenon to nutritionists, geographers, doctors, and administrators, he went on to ask what that showed about the limitations of current economics. From his reading on nineteenth

century famines in Ireland and India and twentieth century ones in India and the Sahel, he concluded that the malign operation of market exchange which resulted in famine was fundamentally similar to the malign commercialization he had observed in Sriharjo and other parts of village Java. In each case, vast discrepancies of power were involved. And in each case ideologies and world views prevailed enabling the powerful to be heartless to the suffering of the powerless.

David gained a lot of satisfaction from working out his ideas for this book. By November 1982 he had a 200-page manuscript to send to friends and colleagues for their comments. But the year of writing was one when self-doubt hit him hard, mainly because of uncertainty about what to do after the book was finished. Would he return to Aboriginal Affairs? Would he be able to find other employment in Australia which would enable him to work on issues he thought important? Would he attempt life as a free-lance consultant? Would he accept a position in the US, with a university or an international organization, with all that that implied for contact with his now adult children?

In February 1983 he returned to the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and found that the atmosphere had greatly improved. Two months later the Hawke Labor government was elected and there was a further marked improvement in his work situation in Aboriginal Affairs. David's last months there were fruitful and satisfying.

His health was normal till August. In that month hospital checks established that he had an advanced form of cancer of the liver. There were some terrible periods in the next two months. But also some periods of being at peace. He took it as his principal task to get the starvation book to the point where it could be sent to a publisher, and after five weeks of systematic work he reached that point.

This is not the place for an evaluation of David Penny's scholarly achievements, nor am I the person to attempt that. But I want to comment briefly on his qualities as a teacher and colleague and his relationship to Indonesia.

David enjoyed teaching immensely, in class as elsewhere, and brought unusual inventiveness to it, using practical examples a great deal and frequently quoting the words of ordinary people, most commonly Indonesian peasants. He often presented his ideas in maverick forms, with scant regard for the conventions of the academy. And many people found his style of thought jagged, enigmatic, and hard to follow, especially on first acquaintance. But most of his students found they learned a lot from him, both about the way the world works and about how they should relate to it. And for a precious few he made a crucial contribution in bringing the concerns of head and heart together.

In Indonesian society, as in Australian, David knew how to be a *bapak*. He certainly loved being "Pak Penny." As Janet said, "he would have been a good old man, that one." But it was his distinctive way of combining bapak roles with fraternal ones that made his appeal to serious students so great.

David was a strong believer in cooperative work. As Peter McCawley wrote of his years with the ANU's Indonesia Project, he

devoted quite extraordinary amounts of time to sharing ideas and research experiences with the staff and students who made up a community of his friends. A draft of any article or thesis chapter about almost any aspect of social, economic or political affairs in Indonesia would attract dozens of detailed comments and suggestions--ranging from the invaluable and entertaining to the downright infuriating. As likely as not, a day or so later, the recipient of one of these barrages would find him willing to spend another three or four hours in discussion.

David Penny's relationship to Indonesia was unusually creative and fulfilling. Partly because he had lived in the country for six years earlier, and partly because peasants and farmers were his central concern, he was able to use his later period of short visits without falling prey to the temptations of "airport sociology." Perhaps the key to his relationship to the country was the closeness of his ties to his Indonesian colleagues and friends. Not only did he do a lot more joint publishing with Indonesians than most of us foreign Indonesianists; he also maintained an intense involvement in the work of several of his Indonesian colleagues on a long-term basis. Rarely has Australia's proximity to Indonesia been put to better use.

In the last instance what was important about David was of course the kind of person he was: strong, dependable, generous, obstinate, open, practical, a fussless idealist, a man without personal ambition, a passionate fighter for causes, and an anguished sufferer when he lost his fights.